

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4689

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 5640

NODIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, SY, US, PLO, XF
SUBJ: SYRIAN PERCEPTIONS THREATEN SETTLEMENT PROCESS

1. SUMMARY: SYRIANS REMAIN COMMITTED TO NEGOTIATIONS BUT ARE SERIOUSLY CONCERNED THAT USG MAY HAVE CONCLUDED IT IS POLITICALLY INCAPABLE OF CARRYING OUT ITS ANNOUNCED INTENTIONS ON BEHALF OF ME SETTLEMENT. THIS PARTIALLY EXPLAINS WHY THEY ARE PREPARING TO CARRY THE DEBATE OVER THE PEACE PROCESS INTO THE NON-ALIGNED AND ISLAMIC FORUMS. NEVERTHELESS, ASSAD IS A HARD-HEADED POLITICIAN AND IS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THERE ARE REALISTIC ALTERNATIVES TO A MAJOR U.S. ROLE IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. HIS ADVICE TO THE PLO RE 242 WE BELIEVE WAS PRIMARILY DESIGNED TO INSURE SYRIA WILL NOT BE EXCLUDED FROM THE PEACE PROCESS. AND YET THROUGH ITS EFFORTS NOT TO BE EXCLUDED, SYRIANS MAY END UP BY SABOTAGING ALL PRESENT PROSPECTS FOR MOVEMENT. RECOMMEND PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE TO ASSAD TO HELP SET STAGE FOR WASHINGTON AND NEW YORK TALKS. OTHERWISE WE WILL FIND KHADDAM GOING TO THE STATES WITH ONLY A LISTENING BRIEF. END SUMMARY.

2. THE SYRIAN PRESS HAS CONTINUED TO QUESTION AMERICAN RESOLVE TO PUSH THE PEACE PROCESS FORWARD IN A CAMPAIGN WHICH MFA OFFICIAL TELLS US HAS BEEN DIRECTED FROM THE PRESIDENCY. I AM PERSUADED IT ACCURATELY
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REFLECTS PRESIDENT ASSAD'S DOUBTS ABOUT OUR INTENTIONS. THESE DOUBTS SHARPLY INCREASED WHEN BEGIN, IN WHAT APPEARED TO SYRIANS TO BE A GRATUITOUS SLAP AT PRESIDENT CARTER, ESTABLISHED NEW SETTLEMENTS AND ANNOUNCED PLAN TO EXTEND SOCIAL SERVICES TO THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES. IN SYRIA EYES, BEGIN NOT ONLY ESCAPED WITH MERE REITERATION OF THE LONG-STANDING U.S. POSITION ABOUT THE ILLEGALITY OF SETTLEMENTS BUT HE

ACTUALLY GAINED GROUND THROUGH A PUBLIC PRESIDENTIAL COMMITMENT NOT TO USE AMERICAN PRESSURE AGAINST ISRAEL ON THIS ISSUE. KHADDAM'S SEPTEMBER 2 STATEMENT IN CAIRO ("AMERICA WILL NOT PRESSURE ISRAEL AND WILL NOT STAND AGAINST IT AS PRESIDENT CARTER MENTIONED IN HIS DECLARATIONS IN THIS REGARD") INDICATES THAT THE SYRIANS HAVE TAKEN THE PRESIDENT'S AUGUST 23 COMMENTS OUT OF CONTEXT (EVEN THOUGH THEY HAD THE TEXT OF THE PRESIDENT'S PRESS CONFERENCE) AND HAVE GROTESQUELY GENERALIZED HIS REMARK TO MEAN THAT HE U.S. WILL NEVER USE ITS INFLUENCE WITH ISRAEL ON ANY ISSUE. THE SYRIANS QUICKLY LEAPT TO THE CONCLUSION THA THE "JEWISH LOBBY" HAD FORCED PRESIDENT CARTER TO TURN THE OTHER CHEEK TO BEGIN. THEY WENT ON TO ASSUME THAT IF THE USG COULD NOT FACE DOWN THE "LOBBY" ON SUCH A CLEARCUT PROVOCATION, WASHINGTON WOULD BE UNABLE TO GUIDE A GENEVA CONFERENCE TO A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION. WE ARE WITNESSING AN UPSURGE IN SYRIA'S NORMAL DEGREE OF POLITICAL PARANOIA AS FAR AS WASHINGTON IS CONCERNED.

3. THE SYRIANS ARE, NONETHELESS, AS CONVINCED TODAY AS THEY WERE A MONTH AGO OF PRESIDENT CARTER'S INTEGRITY, HIS RESOLVE AND HIS GOOD INTENTIONS TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST. THEY ARE EQUALLY AS DETERMINED TO PURSUE THE NEGOTIATING TRACK AND GIVE THE USG EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD THE WAY. THEIR REACTION WAS ONE OF CONCERN WHEN PRESIDENT CARTER HINTED THAT THE U.S. MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO INVESE AS MUCH EFFORT FOR A MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT IF E PARTIES REMAIN INTRANSIGENT.

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ONE EDITORIAL COMPLAINED THIS WOULD PLAY RIGHT INTO ISRAEL'S HANDS.

4. DESPITE SOME CONTRARY EVIDENCE, I HOLD ON BALANCE THAT AL-ASSAD IS NO MORE OBDURATE IN HIS POSITION TODAY ABOUT PEACE NEGOTIATIONS THEN HE WAS AT THE GENEVA MEETING WITH CARTER OR THA HE HAS DECIDED TO FOLLOW A HARDER LINE IN THE FUURE. HIS AUGUST 26 INTERVIEW WITH THE NEW YORK TIMES, WHICH HAS BEEN PLAYED AS A MAJOR FOREIGN POLICY STATEMENT, GENERALLY REPEATS FAMILIAR SYRIAN POSITIONS. WHAT IS NEW HRE IS THE SYRIAN PERCEPTION THA THE USG MAY SEE ITSELF POLITICALLY INCAPABLE OF DOING WHAT WE SAY WE WANT TO DO INTHE MIDDLE EAST.

5. IF THIS INTERPRETATION OF SYRIAN PERCEPTIONS IS CORRECT, IT MAY EXPLAIN IN PART WHY THE SYRIANS DECIDED TO CHANGE THE LOW PROFILE TACTICS THEY PURSUED UNTIL MID-AUGUST. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD IN THE MFA THAT SYRIA'S OBJECTIVE IN CALLING FOR THE SEPTEMBER 26-27 NON-ALIGNED AND ISLAMIC FONMINISERS CONFERENCE IN NEW YORK, AS WELL AS IN THEIR RECENT PRESS ATTACKS AGAINST THE U.S. WAS O CONVINCE THE AMERICAN PUBLIC AMONG OTHERS THAT THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS WON'T GO AWAY

AS LONG AS ISRAEL REMAINS INTRANSIGENT. THEY PROFESS TO BELIEVE THAT THEIR MOVES IN NEW YORK SHOULD HELP PRESIDENT CARTER DEVELOP THE BACKING HE NEEDS IN THE U.S. FOR ACTION AGAINST ISRAEL.

6. I SUSPECT SYRIAN MOTIVES ARE NOT SO ALTRUISTIC. I THINK THEY ARE PREPARING THE GROUND AT HOME FOR POSSIBLE STAGNATION OF THE U.S.-LED EFFORTS AND ARE MOVING TO OPEN THE WAY FOR OTHER FORA, REGARDLESS OF HOW INEFFECTIVE THEY MAY PROVE TO BE, IN WHICH DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS ON THE MIDDLE EAST CAN BE SUSTAINED. SYRIA CANNOT ABANDON DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS TO SOLVE THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS. AS PRESIDENT ASSAD HAS PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGED, THE ALTERNATIVE TO NEGOTIATIONS IS WAR (WE WOULD ADD AT A MINIMUM INCREASED MILITARY CONFRONTATION).
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TION). WITH SYRIA TIED DOWN IN LEBANON AND EGYPT INCREASINGLY NEUTRALIZED, HE IS MOST UNLIKELY TO GAMBLE ON ANY MILITARY OPTION.

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7. ASSAD IS A HARD-HEADED POLITICIAN WHO HAS DEMONSTRATED THIS CHARACTERISTIC AT EVERY TURN IN BOTH DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS. HE IS UNDER NO ILLUSION THAT THERE ARE REAL ALTERNATIVES TO A MAJOR U.S. ROLE IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. BUT THE ROLE THE SYRIANS SEE FOR THE U.S. IS DELIVERING THE ISRAELIS AND IF, AS THEY SEEM INCREASINGLY TO FEAR, WE ARE NOT PREPARED TO PLAY THIS ROLE, THEN THEY ARGUE IT IS

HE U.S, NOT SYRIA, WHICH WILL HAVE OPTED OUT OF THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS.

8. ASSAD'S ADVICE TO HE PLO TO SEEK BETTER TERMS IN RETURN FOR ACCEPTING RESOLUTION 242 WITH RESERVATIONS SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN MOTIVATED HEAVILY THOUGH NOT ENTIRELY SYRIA'S FEAR OF LOSING ITS DOMINANT INFLUENCE OVER THE PLO AND ITS MISTRUST OF U.S., EGYPTIAN AND SAUDI INTENTIONS IN THIS REGARD. OUR FRENCH COLLEAGUES TELL US THAT SYRIAN OFFICIALS TOLD THEM PRESIDENT ASSAD WAS ANNOYED THE PLO IN ITS COMMUNIQUE CLOSED THE DOOR SO TIGHTLY TO THE U.S. EVEN IF ASSAD'S ALLEGED REACTION WAS CORRECTLY REPORTED, I FIND IT SELF-SERVING. A MAJOR OBJECTIVE OF SYRIAN POLICY IS TO MANIPULATE ITS PLO RELATIONSHIP SO THAT SYRIA CANNOT BE EXCLUDED FROM THE PEACE PROCESS. SYRIANS ARE AFRAID THAT, GIVEN HALF A CHANCE, EGYPT AND PERHAPS JORDAN WOULD MAKE SEPARATE AGREEMENTS WITH ISRAEL AND HE GOLAN WOULD NEVER BE RETURNED. TO ACCOMPLISH THEIR OBJECTIVE SYRIA MUST, THROUGH ITS INFLUENCE OVER THE PLO, MAKE ITSELF
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A CRITICAL FACTOR FOR ANY WEST BANK SETTLEMENT. THE IRONY IS THAT IN ITS EFFORTS NOT TO BE CUT OUT OF THE PEACE PROCESS, THE SYRIANS MAY END UP BY SABOTAGING ALL PRESENT PROSPECTS FOR MOVEMENT. NEVERTHELESS, ASSAD HAS NOT TIED HIMSELF INEXTRICABLY TO THE PLO. HIS STATEMENT ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF THE ARAB LEAGUE REPRESENTING PLO INTERESTS WAS A REMINDER TO THE PLO THAT EVEN THAT ORGANIZATION CANNOT TAKE SYRIA FOR GRANTED. IT WAS ALSO A MESSAGE TO OTHER ARAB CAPITALS THAT THE KEY ISSUE IS NOT THE PLO PER SE BUT COORDINATION OF ARAB POLICIES AND DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS.

9. THE GREATEST DANGER INHERENT IN SYRIA'S LATEST ACTIONS IS THAT THEY MAY BACK THEMSELVES INTO A CORNER ON THE SEPTEMBER TALKS IN WASHINGTON AND NEW YORK. THEY ARE RAISING EXPECTATIONS DOMESTICALLY THAT IF KHADDAM COMES AWAY FROM THESE TALKS REPORTING THAT PROGRESS HAS ONCE AGAIN BEEN POSTPONED, THEN A MAJOR CONFRONTATION WITH ISRAEL MUST TAKE PLACE IN THE UNGA WITH THE ATTENDANT REGRESSION TO INFLAMMATORY RHETORIC AND RETRENCHMENT ON BOTH SIDES. HOWEVER, WHILE THE SYRIANS ARE FOND OF THE UNGA, THEY IN FACT PUT LITTLE FAITH IN ITS UTILITY. THEY MIGHT FOREGO THIS OPTION IF PRESIDENT CARTER AND THE SECRETARY CONVINCE ASSAD THAT THE USG HAS A REALISTIC SCENARIO FOR PROGRESS TOWARD GENEVA.

10. IN HIS PRESENT MOOD OF GREATER SKEPTICISM ABOUT U.S. INTENTIONS, WE MAY LOSE VALUABLE TIME IF ASSAD SENDS KHADDAM WITH INSTRUCTIONS PRIMARILY TO LISTEN AT THE WASHINGTON AND NEW YORK TALKS. KHADDAM AS WE ALL KNOW IS KEPT ON A VERY SHORT LEASH AND I AM CONCERNED HE WILL DO LITTLE MORE THAN LISTEN AND COMPLAIN IN WASHINGTON UNLESS INSTRUCTED DIRECTLY

BY ASSAD TO INDICATE AREAS WHERE SYRIA MIGHT BE MORE FORTHCOMING.

11. IN THIS CONNECTION, I CONSIDER IT WOULD BE HELPFUL IF
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IN THE COMING WEEK I COULD DELIVER A MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT CARTER TO ASSAD TO HELP SET THE STAGE FOR THE WASHINGTON TALKS. IT SHOULD ADDRESS THE QUESTION OF MUTUAL CONFIDENCE, THE ESSENTIALITY OF AMERICAN POPULAR BACKING FOR THE PRESIDENT'S POLICY AND ASK FOR SYRIAN HELP IN DEVELOPING THAT BACKING. IDEALLY I SHOULD BE A MESSAGE THAT IS NOT LINKED TO PARALLEL ONES TO SADAT AND HUSSEIN. (NEITHER OF THOSE LEADERS IN ANY EVENT NEED THIS TYPE OF COACHING.) I SUGGEST THE MESSAGE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING POINTS:

QUOTE:

-- I AM ADDRESSING YOU AT THIS POINT BEFORE MY MEETING WITH FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM IN WASHINGTON IN THE SPIRIT OF CANDOR AND COOPERATION WHICH I FEEL WE ESTABLISHED WHEN WE MET IN GENEVA.

-- I HAVE THE DEEPEST RESPECT FOR THE LEADING ROLE SYRIA MUST PLAY IN THE MONTHS AHEAD IF WE ARE TO SUCCEED IN THE COURSE WE ARE CHARTING TOGETHER TOWARD PEACE.

-- ANY DOUBTS ABOUT OUR RESPECTIVE INTENTIONS CAN ONLY SERVE TO CREATE NEW AND UNNECESSARY OBSTACLES.

-- I AM PERSONALLY COMMITTED TO PURSUE THE NEGOTIATIONS TO A JUST AND DURABLE PEACE AND WILL SPARE NO EFFORT TO THIS END. I AM ALSO CONVINCED THAT SUCH A PEACE CANNOT BE ACHIEVED IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY OF THE PRINCIPAL PARTIES INVOLVED AND THIS INCLUDES THE PALESTINIANS AS MUCH AS IT INCLUDES THE SYRIAN AND EGYPT AND JORDAN AND ISRAEL.

-- IN THIS REGARD, I WILL NOT HIDE FROM YOU MY DISAPPOINTMENT THAT THE PLO HAS SEEN FIT TO REJECT THE HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY I HELD OUT TO THEM.

-- KNOWING THE PLO RESPECTS YOUR ROLE AS AN ARAB LEADER AND LISTENS TO YOUR COUNSELS, I ASK YOU TO COUNSEL RECONSIDERATION OF THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD RESOLUTION 242.

-- I CANNOT ASK THE AMERICAN PEOPLE TO COUNTENANCE THEIR GOVERNMENT'S OPENING TALKS WITH AN ORGANIZATION WHICH CONTINUES TO PROCLAIM AS ITS BASIC OBJECTIVE THE LIQUIDATION OF ISRAEL, A COUNTRY WHOSE EXISTENCE WE HAVE SUPPORTED

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FOR 29 YEARS AND WHICH WE WILL CONTINUE TO SUPPORT. IF I DID ASK SUCH A THING FROM MY PEOPLE, THEY WOULD DENY ME THEIR SUPPORT..

-- AT THE SAME TIME, I CANNOT ASK THE AMERICAN PEOPLE
TO CONTINUE ITS SUPPORT FOR EXPENDING ITS GOVERNMENT'S
RESOURCES TO SUCH A HIGH DEGREE ON BEHALF OF ANY PARTY
THAT PROVES UNWILLING TO ENGAGE IN MEANINGFUL NEGOTIATIONS
OR REJECTS THE BASIC PRINCIPLES WE HAVE OUTLINED FOR A
JUST PEACE. UNQUOTE

12. DEPARTMENT MAY WISH PASS AMMAN, CAIRO, JIDDA AND TEL AVIV.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

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Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
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Decaption Date: 22 May 2009
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
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Secure: LOCK1
Status: NATIVE
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TAGS: PGOV, SY, US, XF, PLO
To: STATE
Type: TE
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